



SUMMARY FOR DECISIÓN- MAKERS

Number 3

April, 2008

Decentralization and environmentally sound decision making: Policy implications

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Among the major political and economic trends that have been evolving in Latin America in recent years, the emergence of municipal governments as frontline actors stands out. Central American countries have begun to grant local governments greater rights and responsibilities regarding natural resource management. In Guatemala, one of the major pieces of legislation to achieve important rural development goals, as claimed by the government, is the Law of Decentralization (Decree No. 14-2002). As more decision making is transferred to local governments, one wonders: what are the attitudes of potential local decision makers towards the environment, and which factors may explain such attitudes; what would be the dominant criteria for local decision making in selecting development projects;

and, what will be the level of priority assigned to environmental concerns. This research aimed at answering these questions.

A two phase analytical process was conducted: first, aiming at determining individual local decision makers' attitudes towards the environment and identifying the factors that determine such attitudes; secondly, determining whether, in fact, individual attitude could explain actual decision making.

It was disturbing to find out that a very high proportion of local board members, in the sampled municipalities, were not aware of the new Law of Decentralization, even though the law was passed five years ago. Equally worrying was to realize that most of them learned about new legislation through the media. The state does have the meanings, and of course the responsibility, to ensure that all members are constantly informed by official means of new relevant legislation. Central government is urged to ensure information about the law of decentralization goes to all municipalities, by official means; and, if possible,



together with some specific training as to how to take advantage of it.

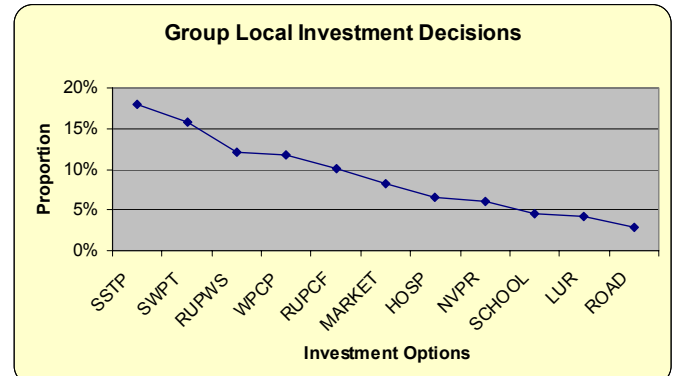
Field work findings correlate well with survey results indicating that a high percentage of board members do attend non-formal training about the importance of the environment. This seems to be, at least in the short run, the most important tool the central government may have to improve environmental attitude, which in turn would contribute to support more environmentally friendly decision making at local level. Field work indicates that NGOs seem to be doing a good work on that matter. Government officials may need to cooperate with environmentally related NGOs, to significantly increase the amount and quality of environmental training being offered locally.

The main items identified by local decision makers as major causes of environmental management problems, clearly indicate major areas where there is an opportunity to develop strategies to improve those limitations: lack of awareness/understanding of ecology, decline in moral/cultural values, and insufficient technical expertise on the part of environmental professionals.

It is also relevant to realize that after poverty alleviation, resource conservation is one of the most important local primary objectives, in the planning and construction of new public investments in their corresponding municipalities.

When confronting actual investment decisions, results indicate that, if an imaginary line is drawn between environmentally friendly investment alternatives versus other alternatives, near 50% percent of the time, they would make environmentally friendly decisions. It should be pointed out, though, that this might be misleading, since field work indicates that the other alternatives (building or improvement of: schools; hospitals or health centers; roads; or, markets), are needs already satisfied in most municipalities and their improvements might have not been so much needed at the time.

Age, gender, education and non-formal environmental training are significant variables in shaping



environmental attitudes. Environmental attitude, as measured by the NEPS, is significant in determining pro-environmental investment decisions.

It is very important to state the preliminary nature of the results and conclusions, due to the fact that the sample of municipalities included in the study was severely limited by budgetary constraints. Nevertheless, it is also worth to emphasize that these results allow the drawing of relevant concerns to be considered by decision making officials, especially at the central government, to accompany the implementation of the decentralization process that is currently taking place in Guatemala.

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“This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the Latin American and Caribbean Environmental Economics Program (LACEEP)”